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IDEAL NEWPORT IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

BY

WILLIAM B. WEEDEN





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IDEAL NEWPORT IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

At the opening of the eighteenth century, the world was growing weary of war. The brutal rule of Spain had been overcome and the aggressive ambition of Louis XIV. was checked by the diplomatic skill of William of Orange; while the increasing sea-power of Great Britain was beginning to balance the continent.

The divine mission of Grotius in the previous century was bearing fruit, and, though France and England contended here and there, these struggles were not wars of extermination. Forces other than warlike were getting exercise and practice, and where was the opportunity better than in a new world, in Aquidneck the isle of peace by the sea? Where did the new forms of civilization assert themselves better and in a more graceful form?

New England was just passing out of the ebb. The later seventeenth century had not developed citizens, equal to the pioneers who had led the way, but stronger men were coming. In the eighties there was a marked increase of commerce, of which a large share came to Newport. With commerce came the opportunity for that expansion, which the conditions of the place greatly favored. In his Century Sermon of 1738, Callender cited Neale in the statement "this is deservedly esteemed the Paradise of New England for the fruitfulness of the soil and the temperateness of the climate." Enthusiasts for this landscape and climate have magnified and illumined their theme, with every resource of rhetoric, as time has gone on. "It appeals to one's alertness rather than to a lazy receptivity. You miss its quality entirely if your faculties

are not in a state of real activity. This does not exclude composure or imply excitement."

In winter, there might be difference of opinion. Mr. George Bradford, a true lover of nature, told me there was all the capricious, beguiling promise of the New England spring with double disappointments in effect. Yet a fine day can tempt a zealot in this wise. "The lotos-eating season is over, plainly, yet there is the same agreeable absence of demand on any specific energies as in summer. The envelope of color—that delightful garment that Newport never puts off—is as evident to the senses as in midsummer, though more silvery in quality." Richard Greenough claimed it to be the American Venice, according to Dr. Hale.

Conscious enlargement and the spirit of growth records itself in 1712, when John Mumford was ordered to survey the streets and number them. "The town had grown to be the admiration of all and was the metropolitan" said the fond record.¹ For the first three decades the expanding community was being prepared for the event which was greatly to affect it, and to influence all New England. Rev. George Berkeley, Dean of Derry, had put forth his "Principles of Human Knowledge" in 1710. Flippant writers in these two centuries have laughed at the transcendent principles of Berkeley, but those laugh best who laugh last. The Dean only held firmly that "the universally acknowledged ultimate cause cannot be the empty abstraction called Matter. There must be living mind at the root of things. Mind must be the very substance and consistence and cause of whatever is. In recognizing this wondrous principle, life is simplified to man."² Certainly the world of Knowledge has moved toward rather than away from the philosopher, since this was written. Here was the creative and impelling idea needed to lift commercial and material Newport out of pioneer life, and into communion with an older civilization and a more refined culture.

Berkeley, on his way to found a college at Bermuda, landed at Newport, Jan. 23, 1729, by accident or design as

¹ Rhode Island Historical Magazine, Vol. VI., p. 216.

² Life and Letters of Berkeley. p. 41.

is disputed, and remained there about three years. Rev. James Honyman was preaching in Trinity church, founded at the beginning of the century, when the letter from Dean Berkeley, proposing to land, was received. He read it to the congregation, dismissing them with a blessing. The pastor and his flock repaired to the wharf in time for the landfall. In this dramatic manner, the ideas of the old world were received into the new.

The philosopher confirms all our reports of the beauty and extraordinary, progressive character of the place, with its 6000 inhabitants. "The most thriving, flourishing place in all America for its bigness."¹ We shall note the sectaries, who "agreed in a rage for finery, the men in flaming scarlet coats and waistcoats, laced and fringed with brightest glaring yellow. The sly Quakers, not venturing on these charming coats and waistcoats, yet loving finery, figured away with plate on their sideboards."²

Graduates from Harvard College were frequent, with an occasional native who had been educated at an English university. The girls were often sent to Boston for their schooling.

Dissenters naturally attracted the notice of this good-humored ecclesiast. "The inhabitants are of a mixed kind, consisting of many sorts and subdivisions of sects. Here are four sorts of Anabaptists besides Presbyterians, Quakers, Independents, and many of no profession at all. Notwithstanding so many differences, here are fewer quarrels about religion than elsewhere, the people living peaceably with their neighbours of whatever profession. They all agree in one point, that the Church of England is second best."³

This accommodating spirit noted by the Dean was enforced in most piquant manner by Captain William Wanton, a Quaker and a son of a preacher. He courted Ruth Bryant, the beautiful daughter of a Presbyterian deacon in Scituate, Mass., who would not hear of such laxity in marriage, but the ardent groom solved the difficulty.

¹ Ibid., p. 160.

² Ibid., p. 157.

³ Ibid., p. 160.

"Ruth, I am sure we were made for each other; let us break away from this unreasonable bondage. I will give up my religion and thou shalt give up thine and we will go to the Church of England and the devil together."¹

Lodowick Updike gives his boyish impression of the liberal Dean in Trinity pulpit. "All sects rushed to hear him; even the Quakers, with their broad brimmed hats, came and stood in the aisles."² In one of his sermons he very emphatically said 'give the devil his due, John Calvin was a great man.'³

Rev. James McSparran settled at St. Paul's church in Narragansett in 1721, was not as tolerant toward the "pestilent heresy" of the Quakers. He stated that there was no established religion "but the Quakers are, for the most part, the people in power."⁴ George Fox came in 1672, on his powerful mission. William Penn said of him that he was "civil beyond all forms of breeding." His influence, working on the radical settlers of the island and their descendants, must have had gracious effect. Historians and critics rooted in the established order of the sixteenth and following centuries, when judging dissent, can only see jangling differences; for they are blindly unconscious of the indestructible elements of beauty, growing out of freedom from arbitrary control in religious and social matters. Good Dean Berkeley cited four varieties of Anabaptists among his new friends and neighbors. Anabaptism simply meant the worst form of anarchy to an ordinary Catholic or Calvinist of the differing centuries. Yet the conservative Erasmus could term them "a people against whom there is very little to be said." In some cases, goaded by severe laws, they were wild and fanatical, but were in general mystically sincere and pious. They

¹ Annals of Trinity Church. p. 52^a.

² "In 1700, one-half the inhabitants were Quakers. Annals Trinity Church. p. 10. Roger Williams affected the Island settlement indirectly. He differed in doctrine from the Friends; while on the other hand, the system of laws established by Coddington and Clarke was adopted by the whole colony and enabled Providence to maintain a cohesive government.

³ Updike, Narragansett Church. p. 120.

⁴ Ibid., p. 510.

were not necessarily historical Baptists, though the rite of baptism usually distinguished them.

In the great social influences forming the Newport of mid-eighteenth century, the Literary and Philosophical Society with the Redwood Library were powerful factors. The first institution was formed in 1730; some claiming that it was originated by Berkeley. Mr. Mason a competent and sympathetic authority says it "owed something of its influence to him we may readily admit; but when he came to Newport, intellectually, he found it no barren wilderness."¹ The people were chosen and elect, whether we consider Coddington, John Clarke and the disciples of Anne Hutchinson, or the friends of Roger Williams, or the converts of George Fox, or the enterprising spirits gathered into "the most thriving place in all America." The Quaker Wanton and the high Puritan Ruth Bryant moulded into genial Episcopalians were fair examples of this annealing culture.

They had books already, as will be shown later, and representatives of all the sects, Jacob the Quaker scientist, Collins and Ward, Seventh Day Sabbatarians; Callender, a Baptist; Leaming, a Congregationalist; the Episcopal Honyman and others banded together. There was an elaborate set of rules, with forfeits and fines for all sorts of neglect and misfeasance, as was common then; some showing the earnest spirit of life prevailing.

The Society was to consider "some useful question in Divinity, Morality, Philosophy, History, etc." but "nothing shall ever be proposed or debated which is a distinguishing religious tenet of any one member. . . . Whoever shall make it an excuse to avoid giving his opinion, that he has not thought of the question, or has forgot what the question is, shall forfeit one shilling. Whoever is unprovided of a proper question, on his turn to propound one, shall forfeit one shilling."²

The first "authentic paper" is dated 1735, though there must have been earlier examples. The Society was con-

¹ Annals Redwood Library. p. 2.

²Annals Redwood Library. p. 14.

ducted vigorously and continued until about 1747 and had some Occasional Members, among whom was Stephen Hopkins of Providence. Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson, another participant, lived at Stratford, Conn. He was an ardent disciple of Berkeley, visiting him soon after his arrival. As he was invited to the rectorate of Trinity in 1750, it shows the permanence of Berkeley's influence in the Colony. Afterwards he was President of King's College, New York.

Newport was a favorite destination for Scotch immigrants, and accordingly their influence was strong in the community. We get an inkling of the relative importance of the port from this statement of Dr. Waterhouse. "Between the years 1746 and 1750 there came over from Great Britain to the English Colonies a number of Scotch gentlemen. Some settled in Philadelphia, some in New York, but the greater part sat down in that pleasant and healthy spot, Rhode Island."¹

Edward Scott² the grand-uncle of Sir Walter, was for more than twenty years, master of the grammar and classical school. He was an active member of the Philosophical Society and Librarian of the Redwood.

There had been collections of books all through the century. Regulations of the Library of Trinity Church were recorded in 1709. Some of those volumes exist in fair preservation, stamped in gold letters "Belonging to y^e Library in Rhode Island."³ Bequests down to 1733 show small collections of good books. John Clarke in 1676 left a Concordance and Lexicon written by himself, also a Hebrew Bible. Benedict Arnold in 1733 left, besides Quaker books, Milton, Quarles, Fuller and Plutarch. In 1747, the Redwood Library was engrafted on the stock of the Philosophical Society. Abraham Redwood, a wealthy merchant and liberal Friend, gave £500. Henry Collins, a Seventh Day Baptist, furnished the land on which the Library stands. Born in 1699, he was a product and a maker of the culture we are studying. Doctor Benjamin Water-

¹ Ibid., p. 28.

² *Annals Trinity Church.* p. 55.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

house, a close friend of Gilbert Stuart,—himself a graduate of the University of Leyden, finally professor of Medicine in Harvard College—called Collins the Lorenzo de Medici of Rhode Island. Hon. William Hunter said of him, “he loved literature and the fine arts; had the sense of the beautiful in nature conjoined with the impulse to see it imitated and surpassed by art; he was a merchant, enterprising, opulent and liberal. Smibert was the father of true painting in this country. . . . Collins was fortunate enough to engage his earliest labors . . . his own portrait, Clap, Callender, above all Berkeley himself.”¹

The list of books² ordered from London is interesting, and we may glance at a name here and there, for we have the spirit of the time in black letter. There were 114 titles in folio. Barclay and Penn, Barrow, Burnet’s Reformation, a general dictionary of ten volumes, Hooker, Grotius, Wood’s Laws of England, Sir William Temple. In quarto 73 titles include dictionaries, Cudworth, Eusebinis, Fluxions, Boyles, Bacon, and Rowe on Wheel Carriages. The octavos cover 95 standard classics, with an occasional Erasmus, Puffendorf or Johnson. History took 73 titles, Divinity and Morality 48, which varied from Sherlock, Butler, Warbuton to Mrs. Rowe’s “Friendship in Death” or “Young Gentleman and Lady Instructed.” Forty titles were in Physick, 24 in Law, 54 in Natural History, Mathematics, etc., 55 in Arts Liberal and Mechanical, 37 in Miscellanies, Politics, etc. In duodecimo, there were 135 examples of very good general reading, as we should phrase it.

These names embody the books they desired; perhaps we should scan more closely those given by several gentlemen; for the volumes are such as they had. In folio 28 titles show Baxter, Beaumont, Fletcher, Chaucer, Herodotus, Homer, Justin Martyr, the Rambler, Spenser. In 22 quarto, 54 octavo were Descartes, Middleton, Addison, Bolingbroke, Calvin’s Institute in Latin, Douglass’ Summary from the author, Gentleman’s Magazine for two

¹ Ibid., p. 27.

² Annals Redwood Library. p. 494

years, twelve magazines from Philadelphia, Grey, Young's Night Thoughts, Roderick Random, Pope, Erasmus.

In a thriving and progressive community, accidents as well as incident contribute to the vital increase. As the Scotch "forty-five" sent out emigrating rebels to give needed strength to the new world, so the earthquake at Lisbon in 1755 sent more than sixty families of accomplished Jews¹ who were generally wealthy merchants, attracted by liberal government and commercial opportunity, to our little isle by the sea.

The Jew first embodied and represented in an individual, the creative power of industry, flippantly characterized as the "Almighty Dollar." It is a fructifying idol, not almighty indeed, but powerful to enlist man with man, and to hold him subjected—not to a greater and sovereign man—but to citizen and people embodied in the State. Feudalism had been tested and found wanting, as it has been recently outgrown in Japan. Greater than the universal imperial power of Egypt and Assyria, greater even than Rome, was the economic force of industry; pledged to the State as a whole, but returning to each man in his own pocket, a universal tribute of mankind to man—the dollar. The philosophy of the eighteenth century, baptized in the blood and sacrifice of French feudal privilege, was necessary to garner in and bestow on each peasant or householder, this new tax, toll, impost and assessment of society, payable to its least and lowest member.

Meanwhile, England was so far ahead of its compeers in modern development that it had cut off the head of a king in the seventeenth century, by way of showing privilege and blind despotism, what was meant by the awakening of the human mind. All this is frequently treated as being absolutely involved in constitutional government, expanding suffrage and parliamentary representation. Truly, it is a part of these great categories of human progress, but it is even more part and portion of the larger social movement; by which not only is government parcelled out by King, Kaiser and cabinet, by parliament, democratic party or

¹ Newport Historical Magazine, Vol. IV. p. 162

aristocracy to render political rights fairly; but also by which the economic dollar flowing out of capitalist's coffer or laborer's pocket can renovate and fructify the whole movement.

By this extraordinary exercise of social force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the face of the world was rapidly changed, Napoleons being elevated, or in turn crushed, by the way. The greatest exponent, the largest interpreter of this universal social force, working through particular individuals, was the historic Jew. He was little comprehended then, he is not wholly understood to-day. Anyone can see that the new economic dispensation did not endow the feudal descendants of fabled Roland or historic Richard with new privilege; nor did it allegate to the robber dynasties of Napoleonic marshals the administration of the new powers of society. It went to the Ghetto for new administrators, in the persons of shivering Shylocks and abject Isaacs of York. The scions and representatives of these new social administrators came out on the enlarged Rialto, the modern Bourse.

I hinted in the beginning, rather than affirmed that Newport was a wayside product of the whole social eighteenth century. The Jew, with his enlarged intelligence and creative skill, went into an appreciative and responsive atmosphere.

The "metropolitan" community, as it called itself in 1712, had come to be an important mart. Dr. McSparran and Douglass substantially agreed in reporting the commerce of 1750 to 1760. Butter and cheese, grain, fat cattle, fine horses, pipe staves and lumber were among the exports, largely to the West Indies. The Narragansett pacers were famous, pacing "a mile in little more than two minutes, a good deal less than three,"¹ according to the worthy parson. There were above 300 vessels of sixty tons and more, including coasters, in the export trade. In 1749, there were 160 clearances for foreign voyages.² In 1770, there were at least 200 vessels in the foreign and 400 in the

¹ Updike, Narragansett Church. p. 514.

² Rhode Island Historical Magazine Vol. VI., p. 310

coasting trade,¹ the population having grown to 12,000. After 1707, trade in sugar, rum, and negroes grew rapidly. Sugar and molasses were distilled at Boston and more at Newport. The slaves were generally carried to the West Indies, sometimes to Newport or Boston. Much capital from Boston assisted in the business at Newport.² Privateering in the French and Spanish wars was a stimulating element in commerce. The Wantons, Ellerys, Malbones, indeed almost all the names are represented in this warring commerce.

Rev. James Honyman³, Scotchman and rector of Trinity from 1704 until 1750, was conciliatory in his ministry. drawing hearers from all the surrounding country. Dr, McSparran, Irishman of Narragansett, learned, acute, disputatious, was a keen sectarian, believing in anybody's establishment, if he could not have his own. He found in 1721 "a field full of briars and thorns." "Here liberty of conscience is carried to an irreligious extreme."⁴

We get a wider outlook and more judicial report from Arthur Brown, son of a rector of Trinity. He lived in Newport until 17 years old, then entered Trinity College, Dublin, becoming Senior Proctor and Professor of Greek. He wrote:

"The innocence of the people made them capable of liberty. Murder and robbery were unknown. During nine years at Newport from 1762 to 1771⁵ (I speak of my own knowledge) only one person was executed, a notorious thief and house-breaker one Sherman. . . . The multiplicity of secretaries (*sic*) and strange wildness of opinions, was disgusting to a reasonable mind, and produced as great a variety, though with no such pernicious effect as in the reign of Charles the First; upon the whole, however, there was more genuine religion, morality and piety diffused than

¹ Ibid., V 7. p. 47.

² Weeden, Economic and Social History of New England, Vol. II, pp. 455-469.

³ Annals Trinity Church. p. 94.

⁴ Updike. pp. 511, 514.

⁵ It will be remembered the population was 12,000. And we should compare the legal and criminal experience of England at same period.

in any country I have ever seen. . . . The state of literature in America was by no means contemptible."¹

The refined culture of such a people must find expression in art, though the century was not fruitful in the plastic arts. John Smibert, another Scotchman, is considered to have been the first artist of note in America. He came to Newport with Dean Berkeley and painted many portraits there. Robert Feke, little known, but one of the best colonial artists, practised there in the mid-century. Gilbert Stuart, the marvellous delineator of Washington born in Narragansett, educated in Newport, was formed at the beginning by these collections of pictures. Cosmo Alexander, an artist of repute, spent two years in America, mostly on the island; he taught Stuart and first took him to England. Washington Allston was fitted for college in Newport. Edward G. Malbone, born at Newport in the revolutionary time, was self-taught and the atmosphere of the island-paradise lighted up his palette. Benjamin West said of his "Hours" that "no man in England could excel it." There is in the delicate lines of this bit of ivory a "dignity, character and expression"² inspired by the whole ideal life I have attempted to set forth. We have in these words, the criticism of a sympathetic artist. I would note also a certain grace which is the refining excellence of beauty.

The grace of culture may be rendered in a picture; its strength and force must be represented by a man or men. Ezra Stiles, though not the outgrowth, was a collateral product of our island. Coincident with the Jewish immigration, he became minister of the Second Congregational Church in 1756, at twenty-nine years of age, influenced "partly by an agreeable town and the Redwood Library." He was Librarian during most of his twenty years sojourn. Corresponding with European authors, he solicited books for the Redwood. His folio Homer is preserved fully annotated by him in the original Greek. He became President of Yale College, the natural precinct of Jonathan

¹ Rhode Island Historical Magazine, Vol. VI., pp. 161, 168-171.

² Arnold. Art and Artists in Rhode Island. p. 9

Edwards¹ who had told the previous generation that the "existence of all exterior things is ideal."

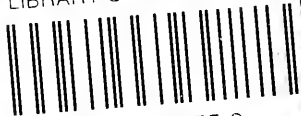
Stiles formed Chancellor Kent, and Channing inheriting his Newport teachings said "in my earliest years, I regarded no human being with equal reverence." If he had done no more than to affect seriously these two men, America would owe him a great debt.

This happy community was fatally damaged by the Revolution, when its commerce fled to the safer port of Providence. Many of its citizens were loyalists, and the armies of both contestants trampled over the city. The society created by its peculiar culture was scattered, and the true "Paradise of New England" ceased to be.

¹ We should note the sympathy, correlative though not derived, between Edwards and Berkeley. "The soul in a sense, has its seat in the brain; so in a sense, the visible world is existent out of the mind; for it certainly in the proper sense, exists out of the brain. . . . Space is a necessary being, if it may be called a being; and yet we have also shown, that all existence is mental, that the existence of all exterior things is ideal." Cited from Edwards by Sereno E. Dwight. *Life and Letters of Berkeley.* p. 182.



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